The Royal Australasian College of Physicians

Paedia[illegible] & Child Health Divisi

Medication Management for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

A brief guide for parents and non health professionals

Please note that this statement concerns medication treatment only. It is not intended to cover other important issues regarding ADHD such as causes, assessment, related problems or other forms of treatment

What is ADHD?

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More on Stimulant medications.

Side effects

- Side-effects of stimulants may include decreased appetite, poor weight gain, and difficulty falling asleep. Less common side effects include stomach-aches, headaches, and dizziness. Occasionally a child treated with stimulant medication becomes irritable, withdrawn or highly emotional. If side effects occur they are usually seen soon after starting, and can often be managed by changing the dose or timing of the medication. If more intense side-effects occur the medication can be stopped without needing to taper off the dose. Most children have no side effects at all.

- The stimulants are not addictive in the doses used to treat ADHD. Studies have shown that children with ADHD treated with stimulant medication are less likely to have problems with drug abuse use in their teenage years than children who are not treated, probably because they are more settled and less likely to take risks.

- The main concern with long-term use has been some decrease in height growth. The most recent long-term studies on this issue suggest that there may be a small reduction in height in some children treated with stimulants compared to similar untreated children. No other long-term effects have been identified, despite extensive use and research over many years.

Effects on the blood pressure and heart

- Stimulant medication may cause a very small increase in heart rate and blood pressure. This is extremely unlikely to cause any problems for children with normal hearts. In certain situations children may require a heart evaluation prior to commencing stimulant medication:
  - ü Children with a known heart or blood vessel abnormality
  - ü Family history of sudden unexplained death under 40 years of age
  - ü Family history of heart muscle or heart rhythm problems

- A drug safety committee in the United States has recently examined whether there is an increased risk of ‘cardiovascular events’ including heart attacks, stroke or sudden death in children and adults taking stimulant medication, compared to the general population. The available data suggests the risk is slightly lower in children taking stimulants

Monitoring

- Children taking stimulant medication should be monitored by their treating doctor. This should occur regularly in the early phase of treatment, and at intervals of no longer than 6 months while the child is taking stimulants. Height, weight, heart rate and blood pressure in particular should be monitored.